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How Bug Juice Wishes and Caviar Dreams Saved a Beloved Summer Camp

Generations of campers have developed their artistic talents and ambitions at Buck's Rock. When the storied summer camp faced extinction, one of them decided to rescue it.

BY MATTIE KAHN PUBLISHED: JUN 7, 2025

LULU SYRACUSE; COURTESY BUCK'S ROCK CAMP

Before it was home to an arts camp spread over 118 bucolic acres, New Milford, Connecticut, was a center for trade crisscrossed with freight train tracks. So when **Buck's Rock Camp**—a free-for-all of a summer program where campers engage in activities like weaving and glassblowing—needed to figure out how to get the attention of the entire camp at once, someone came up with the gong. Salvaged from a scrap pile, an abandoned railroad tire was put to work.

It has since become an institutional icon. When struck, it sounds across the entire grounds. There isn't a camper—former or current—who doesn't recognize its pitch. It's a clock, signaling wakeup and bedtime. It's a fixture of the storied summer camp, which counts among its alumni the novelist Erica Jong, her daughter the journalist Molly Jong-Fast, the actress Paz de la Huerta, and Ezra Koenig of Vampire Weekend. And 10 minutes down the road it reverberates in the summer home of **Diane von Furstenberg**. When someone strikes the gong with some muscle, it makes its presence known.

"I think that's part of the reason the owner thought we would be interested," says Antonia Steinberg, the camp's 24-year-old president, who bought Buck's Rock before she graduated from college and turned it into a nonprofit. It wasn't just that Steinberg, who also happens to be von Furstenberg's granddaughter, started attending Buck's Rock at 10 and has spent at least a few weeks there every summer since; it's that the von

Furstenbergs are good neighbors, ones who never lodged a noise complaint, ones a down-and-out camp operator could call for a cup of sugar—or a few million dollars to save a legendary summer camp.

LULU SYRACUSE

Antonia Steinberg, the president of Buck's Rock, was a camper—before she bought the storied Connecticut institution in 2020.

Buck’s Rock has been around since 1943, when Austrian refugees and educators Ilse and Ernst Bulova decided to build a summer escape for adolescents. With a Montessori bent, the couple emphasized farming, crafts, music, and the dramatic arts. Buck’s Rock has taken in misfits, artists, and eccentrics ever since (including this writer’s husband, who spent most of his time there perfecting his ping-pong game). **The artist Paul Arnhold** discovered glassblowing at Buck’s Rock, having wandered into the shop on his second morning there. He went on to college and had “traditional jobs” after he graduated, but his memories of those working artists stuck with him. “I met a lot of wonderful people, all of whom were so creative. I made lifelong friends there,” he says. “It was just a very nurturing, safe, beautiful place.” It changed his life. Steinberg’s, too. She couldn’t watch it just disappear.

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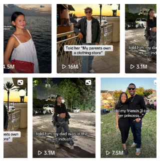
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Steinberg didn’t grow up dreaming of being a summer camp president. News of Buck’s Rock’s dire financial situation reached her while she was still a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, focused on sculpture and furniture making. It was 2020, and the pandemic had imperiled camps nationwide. The state of New York would not let them open. Nationwide, 62 percent had gone dark. Summer camp exists in other countries, but it’s an American institution, a cultural export as captivating and transporting as the blockbuster and ice cold

Coca-Cola. It's where friendships form and deepen. It's where first romances bloom. And, of course, for some it's a kind of members club for the elite offspring of titans and moguls. That is, if it can remain solvent.

A few months into the pandemic, Steinberg heard from the then-owner of Buck's Rock. "He was like, 'This is not working. I really, really want to get out of this,' " she remembers. He intimated that Buck's Rock would have to close unless he could find someone to sell it to. Ironic, given the Bulovas' socialist roots. But doesn't it so often go like that? The camp was in need of a philanthropist's well-resourced life raft.

> Whenever Steinberg's family would plan a trip, she'd decline. "No, I'm going to Buck's Rock."

Later Steinberg learned that her grandmother Diane von Furstenberg had tipped the owner off that she would buy the camp one day. He had reached out to Steinberg's mother Tatiana first. "And she was like, 'Well, I don't want to run a summer camp,' " Steinberg says, laughing. But Tatiana told him her daughter might be interested to know about the fate of her summer retreat.

"It was good timing," Steinberg says. She had decided to take a break from RISD until the pandemic receded (art school was "so pointless over Zoom"). She had "nothing but time." She had also just recently completed a program for next generation philanthropists, following her formal appointment to the board of the Diller–von Furstenberg Family Foundation. "It was about purpose-driven work and how I was going to do that, and then literally weeks later I get this phone call," Steinberg says. "It was like, 'Okay, this is the thing.' "

Steinberg started making moves to acquire the camp during the summer of 2020, and the sale closed in December. She is frank when asked about the price tag. She paid about $10 million in all—a sum that included not just the land and the buildings but the equipment, the brand, the alumni database, countless photos and ephemera, and the archives. Months later she was not just the owner but also, as former camper and current director of development Alexandra Huber-Weiss puts it, “landscaper, plumber, and electrician.”

COURTESY BUCK'S ROCK CAMP

Buck’s Rock founders Ernst and Ilse Bulova, photographed at the summer camp in the 1950s. The summer destination went on to host young creatives including the novelist Erica Jong, her daughter the journalist Molly Jong-Fast, the actress Paz de la Huerta, and Ezra Koenig of rock bandVampire Weekend.

Steinberg tells me she learned to build a budget and read a spreadsheet while facing off with skunks and assessing deteriorating roofs before the campers even arrived. We meet at the Lower East Side restaurant

Dimes, which is near her apartment. She's dressed in simple slacks and bears a distracting resemblance to the actress Rachel Weisz. When Steinberg turns her phone over on the table, I can see she has a Buck's Rock PopSockets accessory affixed to the back of it.

There are, of course, people who might have delivered their beloved summer camp from ruin, but most would have excused themselves from the job of running it. When I tell her as much, Steinberg shoots back that the idea of delegating didn't cross her mind. "I never imagined another option," she says. "I never imagined saving it and then stepping away." Besides, she doesn't think the foundation would have backed the purchase if she had. It couldn't be a fantasy of rescue. It would have to be her job. ("Not a job," says Diane von Furstenberg. "A career.")

"My family really supported it from the beginning," Steinberg says. "I had been going there since I was a kid. Every time they would say, 'We're going to do a big, extravagant trip to the edges of the world. Are you coming?' I'd be like, 'Actually, no, I'm going to Buck's Rock.' They were used to me dropping everything for this place." ("Thank God there were a lot of winter trips," DVF says.)

"I made lifelong friends there. It was just a very nurturing, safe, beautiful place."

Steinberg says her family didn't get jealous; she appreciates that their attitude was more like, " 'Oh, this is cool. She has something that she cares this much about.' It was never like, 'What the hell are you doing?' "

Steinberg did ask herself that question, frequently, when her first campers showed up. Her counselors-in-training were 16. When she took over Buck's Rock, she was 20. "I was so nervous," she says. "I was so nervous for an entire year and a half." Later she returns to the stress of that period with characteristic bluntness. "I was a senior in college, and I wanted to graduate," she says. "It was a crazy time in my life."

Of course, camp has long been a haven for children going through "a crazy time" in their lives. Molly Jong-Fast, the journalist, spent two summers at Buck's Rock, grateful to have found a program for kids that gave her an excuse to spend weeks at a time someplace away from home and did not force her to participate in a single sport. She remembers doing "a lot of batiking," experimenting with sculpture, and putting zero pressure on herself to create some great masterpiece. "I loved that camp," she says. "It was a happy, relaxed place for me."

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The pandemic was still going strong when Steinberg took over, so Buck's Rock became a bubble for the season. Staffers were permitted to leave the campus only if they promised to stay outdoors or wear masks. Bunks were set aside for quarantining. Testing was frequent. "It was not an easy summer," Huber-Weiss says. Steinberg took just a few hours off the whole season. "I didn't go anywhere," she says. "I just lay in the sun. Otherwise it was 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., just making sure shit didn't go very, very wrong."

Mostly, it went right. Steinberg is pleased to report that "nobody died, not even close." But machines broke, staffers fretted, and campers cried. Counselors bickered, hooked up, broke up. "Have you ever seen that show *Below Deck*?" she asks, referring to the Bravo reality show that documents the upstairs-downstairs dynamic between staff and guests aboard a yacht in some exclusive locale. "Camp drama is not unlike that." Steinberg has spent much of her life as a guest. She is now firmly, unreservedly staff.

When she first came to Buck's Rock as a camper, Steinberg resolved to "do literally everything." Her mother came to pick her up at the end of the summer and found her in the bookbinding workshop—the last craft on offer that she hadn't tried. During subsequent summers she focused on woodworking and music. Steinberg formed a band and is still close with its members. Several of her camp friends came to help that first summer she spent as president, volunteering in workshops and bunks. Charlotte Mildenberger (former bandmate and college roommate) helped run evening activities and organize the mailroom, which was overwhelmed by Amazon packages. She had unofficial duties, too. "I was kind of Antonia's emotional support," Mildenberger says. "It was like, 'There is not a right time to do everything. You just have to jump when the opportunity arises.'"

Buck's Rock Alumni

Artist Paul Arnhold

NEILSON BARNARD/GETTY IMAGES

Journalist Molly Jong-Fast

AL PEREIRA // GETTY IMAGES

Musician Ezra Koenig

ASTRIDA VALIGORSKY // GETTY IMAGES

It doesn't surprise Mildenberger that Steinberg has made the most of it. "It sounds cheesy, but she does everything to the fullest. It was shocking when she told me, but then it was like, 'Oh, of course she is going to kill it.' "

Since becoming a nonprofit under Steinberg's stewardship, Buck's Rock has moved to a sliding scale tuition model. Applicants are accepted on a rolling basis, after an interview with the camp's director. The main criterion for acceptance is wanting to be there, Steinberg says. There's no portfolio submission. No audition. If you're interested, you're qualified. "Last summer 27 percent of our campers paid nothing," Steinberg says. "That's over 100 kids who couldn't have afforded to come do something like this. We want all these kids to make the most out of this experience and to find their voice and express themselves. It's magic."

Magic, with some decidedly mundane concerns. Phones are a constant negotiation. Until 2014 Buck's Rock had payphones that campers could use to call home. Now they get an hour of phone use per day, with no phones at all during the first week. Steinberg is constantly second-guessing the policy. "Personally, I don't know why they need their phones every day," she says. "I have to be reminded what the reason is. But this is not a hill I'm willing to die on."

> "Something very strong that I inherited from my mom, and her from *her* mom, is an inherent sense of responsibility."

She's more focused on giving kids the best possible summer and creating a professional environment that brings counselors and staffers back. "I don't have a lot of other work experience," she acknowledges. "But we laugh through it all, which is so important, because it really is hard work." Steinberg wants to tell me illustrative stories, but she can't find the language to describe how intense the job is. "You wouldn't believe some of the shit that we have to deal with," she says. "Literal shit in some cases." (This summer Steinberg will replace two septic tanks. It will cost $30,000.) "And then there are also just people problems," she says. "There are 560 people there at a time, and emotions are high."

It's not a fashion empire or a broadcasting corporation, but it is a kind of empire, and it's Steinberg's. DVF, proud grandmother, is thrilled to see her presiding over it. "I am happy for her that she found her path so early in her life," she says. "Most people don't ever." She adds that she did predict this. "I saw her passion, and I told Antonia, 'One day it will be yours,' " DVF remembers. "And sure enough, it became so."

The camp, and all its problems. In addition to having a camp director who has a PhD in psychology and three decades of experience working with children, Steinberg keeps a guidance counselor in every bunk. Part of their work in the first summers after the pandemic was reminding campers how to socialize. “Kids just didn’t know how to share space anymore,” she says.

Steinberg is plotting partnerships to make use of the grounds during the off-season, an initiative that includes a weekend for adults toward the end of the summer. Shenanigans are possible. Steinberg doesn’t tell me how she knows, but she insists with a grin that several children have been conceived at Buck’s Rock.

A fresh batch of campers will soon arrive, some of whom know nothing about metalsmithing or music. Steinberg—heiress, scion to a fashion dynasty, philanthropist in her own right—will greet them. Things will break. She will fix them. “I have a fantasy life where I graduated from RISD and spent 10 years traveling and doing workshops around the world,” she says. “It would have been so easy to do that. But something very strong that I inherited from my mom, and her from *her* mom, is an inherent sense of responsibility.” No one can say she hasn’t put it to work.

Steinberg isn’t sure how long she’ll remain at Buck’s Rock, but she knows that education is a calling. We happen to meet at the end of a hard week for her chosen field. The media is reporting that the Trump administration plans to dismantle the Department of Education. Activists are apoplectic. Steinberg is heartbroken. As usual she’s pouring her emotions into camp. Her “gentle resistance.”

Later she tells me about one camper who was having a hard time at the beginning of last summer—not fitting in, feeling anxious. A few nights later, the same kid was onstage, playing the drums in front of a crowd of his peers screaming his name. “It’s very moving,” Steinberg says. She could have done anything. She could have done nothing. But she feels grateful to be doing this. “You know what I realized? Not a lot of jobs give you that.”

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